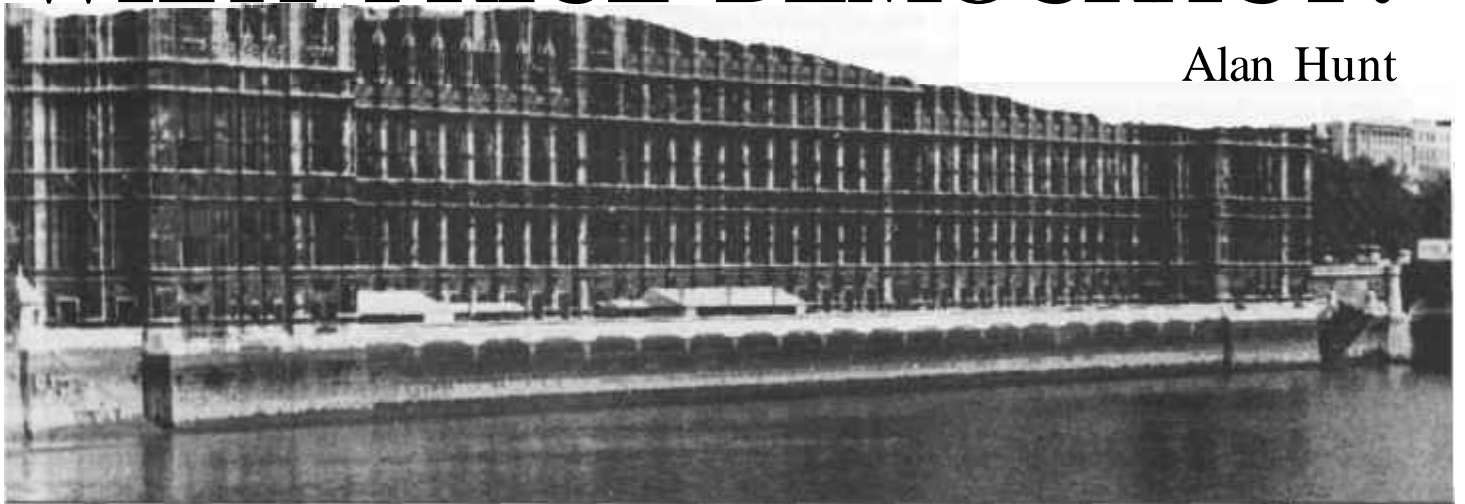


The Left has neglected, and sometimes even dismissed, the issue of democracy.



WHAT PRICE DEMOCRACY?

Alan Hunt



THE QUESTION OF DEMOCRACY lies at the heart of any prospect of achieving socialism in Britain. Large sections of the population doubt or deny the democratic credentials of the socialist Left. These doubts vary in content. The popular support for the Labour Left is adversely affected by its support for what is widely regarded as a bureaucratic and statist view of socialism¹. Communists encounter an even higher level of suspicion. This involves two dimensions: first, it questions the commitment of Communists to respect and abide by the democratic will of the people. Second there is the widely held

view that the 'communism' practised by the Soviet Union is both anti-democratic and authoritarian.

We should not make the mistake of attributing these suspicions simply to the evil effects of anti-socialist propaganda. This only works because there are real problems upon which it can play. The question of democracy and its relation to socialism is a *real problem* which will not go away if it is ignored.

In advanced capitalist democracies, like Britain, only a 'revolutionary democratic strategy' stands any chance of bringing about socialist change. The core of such a

strategy involves the completion of the democratic revolution initiated by capitalism in its struggle against feudalism. It involves both a qualitative and a quantitative extension of democracy with parliament as the central political institution. Parliament is central in that it is the primary link between civil society, that is the whole of social and economic life, and the state. Parliament is the forum in which interests are represented and it is the major

¹The issue of 'statism' has been discussed in this journal by Geoff Hodgson, June 1984 and Stuart Hall, November 1984.

There is no single theory of democracy bequeathed by the founding fathers of Marxism

mechanism for making the state accountable.

The two faces of democracy

One of the reasons why the question of democracy is a controversial question for Marxists is that two distinct trends can be found within the Marxist tradition. These give a very different assessment of democracy. On the one hand democracy is nothing more than a disguised form of class rule. On the other democracy is an essential precondition for the advance to socialism and one of its major goals.

There is no single theory of democracy bequeathed by the founding fathers of Marxism. No Marxist theory of democracy can be compiled by stringing together a selection of quotations. Rather it is an important and interesting tension within Marxism which has to be explored.

In order to explore the relationship between socialism and democracy we must set aside the simplified version of Marxism offered up as 'Marxism-Leninism'. It puts forward as the whole truth the one-sided accentuation of this more complex legacy. The general position is set out in the orthodox Soviet text *The Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* which lays down that 'democracy in the imperialist countries is a screen for the very real dictatorship of the big capitalist monopolies, directed against the working class'.² On this view 'bourgeois democracy' is a sham and a fraud. Revolution will replace this fake democracy with 'proletarian democracy' which will be 'real' democracy for the workers.

The revolutionary democratic perspective

The revolutionary democratic perspective draws upon, and also extends, the trend within classical Marxism which emphasises the intimate connection between socialism and democracy. It stresses that the struggle for socialism is a continuation of the struggle for political democracy which has been at the centre of the history of capitalism.

Capitalism concentrates economic power in the hands of a small class of owners of capital. Yet its characteristic and most successful political system, representative democracy, greatly extended political par-

ticipation through universal franchise. The extension of the franchise not only gave rise to the importance of the ballot box but brought into existence political parties to compete for and to represent different interests.

As Lenin aptly put it: 'a democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism'.³ Representative democracy involves two basic features: first the extension of participation in representative institutions, and second, the existence of constitutional restraints upon the exercise of state power.

The advance of political democracy under capitalism is in marked contrast to the absence of democracy in the economic sphere. Capitalism thus exhibits the coexistence of political democracy and private property. In this combination it facilitates the growth of great inequalities of wealth and power, including concentrations of economic power. This gives rise to a pervasive feature of capitalist societies: a political system which frequently finds itself under pressure to control or regulate an economy which is composed of increasingly powerful aggregations of institutional private wealth. The result is a constant battle over the scope and degree of democratic control over economic conditions.

Under Thatcherism the political system seeks to subordinate itself to the libertarian economic doctrine. The result is the paradox of an increasing centralisation of state power epitomised in the attempt to restrict the democratic scope of local government.

So far the uneven development of democracy within capitalist society has been presented as a contest between the political and economic spheres. A fuller picture needs to take on the fact that in every aspect of social life there is an ongoing contest for democratic control. The example of control over leisure time illustrates the complexity of this broader democratic struggle. As leisure time expands, as opportunities and choices for self-activity multiply, then so at the same time is leisure subject to greater commercial pressure. At the same time leisure ceases to be self-activity but becomes passive and exploited.

To return to the most developed aspect of democracy, namely political democracy. Under capitalism political democracy first and foremost emphasises its *formal* qualities; in particular the formal equality of citizens to participate in electoral processes, but also with respect to access to the courts.

These features of formal democracy exist side by side with the massive *substan-*

tive inequality within capitalist society. Whilst political democracy provides the formal conditions for political competition (eg, political parties, universal suffrage etc), the terms of that competition are significantly influenced by great inequalities with regard to the ownership and control over the means of communication, the economic resources of the different political parties etc.

Of even greater importance in influencing the outcome of the political process is the complex set of circumstances, both material and ideological, which place the majority of the population in circumstances in which they lack either individual or collective control over their lives. They are always subject to processes which favour (but do not guarantee) the acquiescence, passivity and lack of participation in those things which determine the quality of the lives of the majority of citizens. It is often the case that the most downtrodden and oppressed seem passive, even fatalistic, in the face of their adversities.

A central feature of the case against capitalism is precisely that whilst it has created greatly expanded possibilities for the great mass of the people it denies them effective democratic control over their lives. There is, for example, an important sense in which the current mass unemployment is a greater social disaster than that of the 1930s. It comes after three decades of expanding horizons and expectations. It is little wonder that the degree of social demoralisation is today so deep and profound.

Consummating democracy

The most important question is: can the mechanisms of political democracy, created under capitalism, be utilised to end the economic system that created them? Can representative democracy create a socialist transformation? Or do these mechanisms of democracy suffer from such intrinsic deficiencies that they are incapable of providing the conditions for the achievement of socialism?

The institutions of political democracy present no intrinsic barrier to socialist transformation. They provide the necessary conditions for first realising and then securing the advance to socialism. The most important feature of the revolutionary democratic perspective is the idea that the project of socialism is to *complete* the development of democracy. This consummation of the democratic process will require the use of democratic political power to bring about the extension of democracy into all spheres of social life,

We must set aside the simplified version of Marxism offered up as 'Marxism- Leninism'

but most importantly, into the economy.

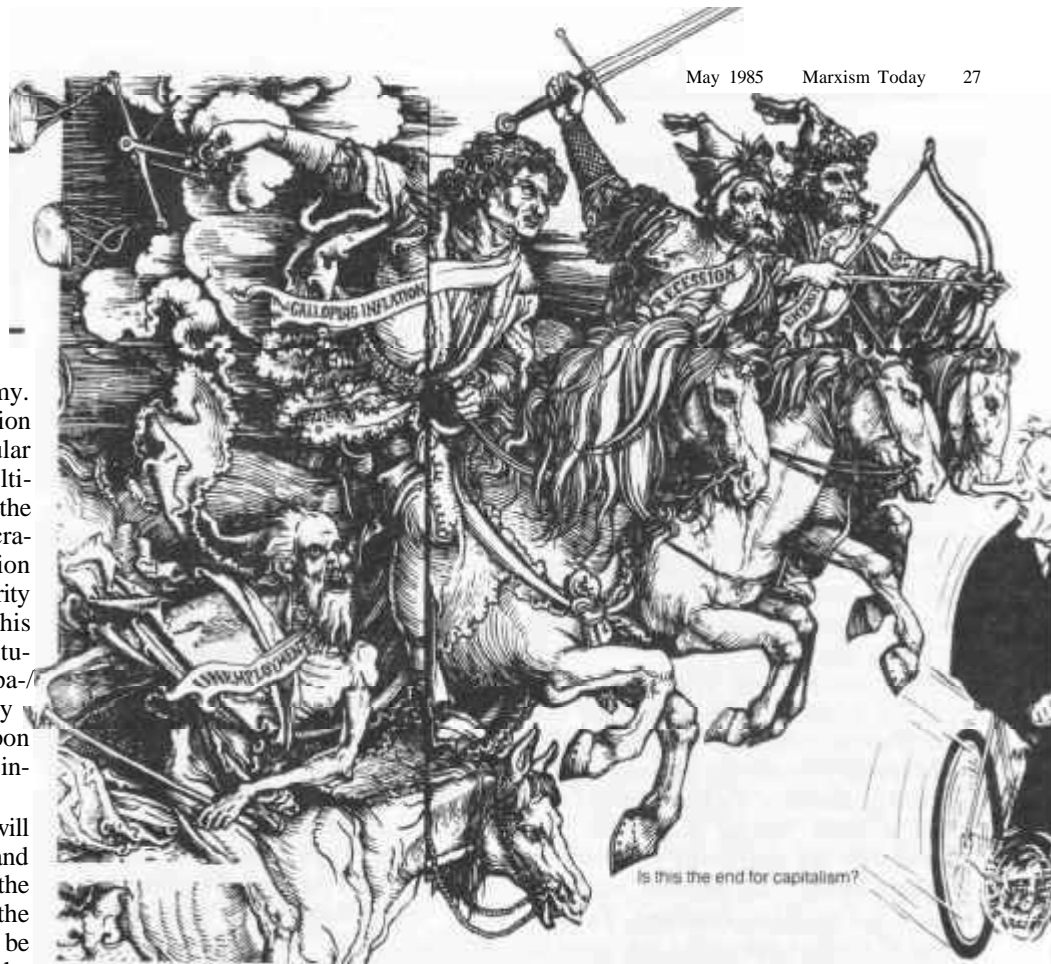
It is important to stress that the creation of economic democracy, that is popular control over the economy, is not the ultimate goal of socialism. Rather it is the means to achieve a much greater democratic project: the democratic participation and control by the overwhelming majority of citizens of all aspects of social life. This requires not so much a change of institutions but a massive extension of participation. This expansion of participatory democracy is what will react back upon institutions requiring them to be increasingly open and accessible.

It follows that socialist development will involve the transformation of political and economic institutions. In particular the more or less radical transformation of the coercive apparatuses of the state will be necessary. Whether this will require the dismantling of these institutions or their democratisation will depend upon particular historical circumstances. It is, however, certain that no general formula of 'smashing the bourgeois state machine' will suffice. This formula is seriously deficient because it fails to distinguish between coercive bodies and the institutions of political democracy.

The most important general feature of this process will be the retention of political democracy whilst eradicating the substantive inequalities in the economic, cultural and social fields. One way of expressing this process is to see socialist democracy as requiring the organisation of economic and social life to 'catch-up' with the democratisation of political life.

This revolutionary democratic perspective has major implications not only for the strategy for achieving socialism, but also for the character of the socialism that will be developed. It insists that the major advances secured by representative democracy be both guaranteed and extended. Most important is the unequivocal insistence upon the need to preserve political competition or pluralism. This requires competing political parties, freedom of association and speech. These will exist alongside new extensions of political competition, for example, with regard to access to the means of communication.

Also important is the principle of poli-



tical revocability. Without a clear guarantee that the electorate have an unqualified right to both elect and remove a socialist government there is little likelihood that they would ever take the first step.

To sum up: the revolutionary democratic strategy insists upon the necessity and the possibility of using the basic mechanisms of political democracy (elections plus parliament) to create a socialist society. This will involve extending political democracy into the field of economic democracy. This combination of political and economic democracy will have the capacity to achieve a much greater and more revolutionary democratisation of the whole field of social life. In this completion of democracy the objective is the free, conscious, self-determining and co-operative control of every aspect of human life. In this process democracy is not simply the form within which social life takes place but rather becomes the very essence of an emancipated society.

Objections to this strategy

The perspective outlined above needs to respond to a range of objections,

(a) *'Democracy in general'*: The first objection is that the argument employs an abstract or universal idea of 'democracy in general'; this is an approach criticised by both Marx and Lenin. The argument advanced has been attentive to the historic-

al stages and the contradictions in the development of democracy. In this sense there is nothing unhistorical or abstract about the democracy under discussion. But at the same time it is necessary to insist that democracy does have important general features (eg, the level of public participation in political life or the extent of the powers of democratic institutions). Thus it is both possible and necessary to compare the democratic content of different social systems.

(b) *'Bourgeois democracy' versus 'proletarian democracy'*: Fundamentalist Marxism insists on a sharp distinction between bourgeois and proletarian democracy. The former is democracy for the bourgeoisie whilst the latter secures democracy for the workers. Such an analysis derives strong support from Lenin's famous text *The State and Revolution*. One of the difficulties in assessing Lenin's analysis is that it is rarely clear whether it is directed against the very limited and backward institutions of Russia or against parliamentary institutions in general.

One of the major objections to the politics that presents itself in the name of 'Marxism-Leninism' is that it simply

²Kuusenen (ed) *The Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* 1961 p637.

³Lenin 'State and Revolution' *Collected Works* Vol 25 p393.

makes universal that which Lenin himself treated in a much more specific historical context. So today we find that 'Marxism-Leninism' objects that bourgeois democracy is uniquely a vehicle for capitalist class rule. And from this it follows that 'socialist democracy' necessarily requires a different (but generally unspecified) form. Further socialism is presumed to require the abolition of bourgeois parliamentarianism.

What this type of analysis fails to address is: what is it about a parliamentary system which makes it the exclusive vehicle of capitalist class rule? Only if a set of institutions must have one, and only one, class characteristic can this unique association of capitalism and a parliamentary system be sustained.

If we examine the typical 'Marxist-Leninist' criticisms of parliamentary systems it becomes clear that they fail to prove this necessary connection between capitalism and parliaments. Parliaments are castigated as mere 'talking shops' and contrasted with the superiority of Soviets as 'working bodies' that combine both legislative and executive functions. Yet it is not at all obvious that such a conflation of legislative and executive function is either possible or desirable. Only if there is a separation of such functions is it possible

for there to be supervision of the administrative and executive function. A powerful argument can thus be advanced in favour of such an institutional separation between those who make the laws and those who apply them. To merge the two functions creates the serious danger of generating unaccountable and uncontrollable power.

It is clear that there are very real limitations on the ability of parliaments to control governments. But rather than abandoning such a goal it seems preferable to reinvigorate these functions. The experience of the Soviet Union should make us aware of the profound weakness of institutions such as the Supreme Soviet which has no capacity for exercising supervision over either government or party.

Political pluralism

(c) *Political competition under socialism:* One of the most important differences between fundamentalist Marxism and the revolutionary democratic perspective revolves around the question of whether a future socialist society will experience political competition. The fundamentalist argument runs as follows: bourgeois democracies have a parliamentary system because they contain competing classes. These classes give rise to political parties

which, more or less accurately, express the conflicting class interests. Hence, parliamentary style electoral contests between competing parties. Under socialism classes, more or less rapidly, disappear; as a result there is no need to perpetuate a political system which institutionalises political competition. The practical expression of this line of thought is the characteristic one-party system of 'actual socialism'.

The case against guaranteed political competition under socialism rests on two key assumptions: (a) that the source of political competition is the existence of classes, and (b) that in a classless society there will be no sources of fundamental political conflict. Both assumptions are wrong.

Whilst class antagonism is the cause of much major conflict in class society it is not the only source of such conflict. Conflict arises, for example, between different sectors of the economy (eg, agriculture v industry), around gender divisions, and around regional and national differences. The central problem of political analysis is to examine the ways in which class interests are articulated or expressed along with the many other sources of political conflict.

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It follows that even if a socialist society is able to make rapid advances towards abolishing class antagonism we will still have no reason for assuming that the sources of political conflict will disappear. It seems entirely reasonable to insist that in the development of socialism many profound political conflicts will occur. Let me illustrate just one: to what extent should socialism employ all available means to increase production? To what extent should the expansion of production be limited to protect other species and the natural environment? The issue of production versus conservation will be one of many very basic and important political conflicts that will confront any socialist society.

If political conflict will continue under socialism the right to organise into political parties to campaign for political objectives will be essential. The case for political pluralism under socialism is further strengthened by the necessity of political parties exercising surveillance and control over state and public institutions. The experience of actual socialism, in all its forms, points to a persistent deficiency in its ability to control the accumulation of power in the hands of party and state institutions.

The role of the individual

(d) *Democracy and Inequality*: It can be argued that bourgeois democracy is fatally distorted because it ignores the basic structural inequalities of capitalist relations. Hence it is argued that the 'freedoms' and 'liberties' much hallowed by capitalists and their apologists are a sham. Most importantly it is argued that to defend bourgeois democracy is to elevate the formal equality which it assumes, but is to ignore the real inequalities on which it is based.

This argument draws the wrong conclusion from a correct premise. The distinctive feature of capitalist society is correctly identified as the structural inequality which invades all aspects of social and political life. Thus the freedom and equality central to the ideological values of bourgeois democracy are unattainable because of the inherent inequality that stems from the private ownership of the means of production. This is the heart of the argument between socialism and capitalism.

But it does not follow from the structural inequalities of capitalist society that the ideals of representative democracy are unrealisable. Quite the contrary, it is the inability of a society founded on capitalist inequality to realise its own ideological

goals that makes the case for socialism so powerful. The case for abolishing the structural inequalities of capitalism is that only through this course of action will it be possible to achieve the realisation of freedom and equality. Socialism is necessary because capitalism cannot realise the social and political ideals which it introduced on to the agenda of history. Put bluntly, only socialism can realise the emancipatory project ushered in by the rise of capitalism.

(e) *Democracy and bourgeois individualism*: One particularly important objection is that it is wrong to accept 'bourgeois' ideals and turn them into socialist goals. Such ideas are at root individualist; they focus on the problems of democracy, freedom and equality looked at from the viewpoint of private individuals. Marx it is argued, powerfully criticised 'the rights of egoistic man', of 'abstract, artificial man', and 'the liberty of man as an isolated nomad'.⁴ Socialism it is argued focuses its concern on collective rather than individual persons, on classes rather than private persons.

Here we confront some of the most difficult questions of socialist politics and socialist philosophy. The tension between

⁴ Marx 'On the Jewish Question' *Collected Works* Vol 3 pp 162-64.



THE NATIONAL GRAPHICAL ASSOCIATION (1982)

Sends May Day greetings to all in the Trade Union and Labour Movements.

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General Secretary

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the individual and the community, between the self and others are especially important for socialists.

Socialism holds out as one of its major claims for superiority over capitalism what Marx captured in the famous phrase in the *Communist Manifesto*. Socialism aims for a society in which 'the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all'.⁵ Marx does not tell us how the tension, and possible conflict, between 'each' and 'all' is to be resolved. But it is of importance to note that Marx is unambiguous: it is the development of individuals which is the *precondition* of the collective development. One of the most damaging features of Stalinist thought and practice has been its counterposing of collective against individual interests; in so doing individual interests are first ignored and later increasingly subordinated to the collective. And at the same time the 'collective' becomes more and more abstract, and ends up being synonymous with the interests of the 'party', and finally with those of the 'general secretary'. This error has proved historically to be the harbinger of a tyranny that acts in the name of the class, but in so doing subordinates both individuals and the collective interest.

The revolutionary democratic perspective insists that for socialist politics there can be no advancement of collective interests unless this is grounded in the protection and advancement of individual interests. The individualist limits of individual interests that Marx pointed to are not to be overcome by superimposing collective interests over individual interests. Rather the objective must be to advance individual interests in such a way that a conscious recognition of group, community and class interests allows individuals to cast aside narrow selfishness in favour of a developing and expanding social responsibility. Thus individuals must have the full right of democratic political participation, whether in political parties, trade unions or parliamentary elections, in order to create the conditions for the 'free development of all'.

Socialism and democracy

In order to make the implications of the revolutionary democratic position as clear as possible I will summarise the conclusions about the relationship between socialism and democracy as follows:

* The goal of socialism in the political arena is to *complete* the democratic revolu-

tion heralded by the rise of representative democracy under capitalism.

* Representative democracy provides the best political framework for the transition to socialism.

* In the transition to socialism the major political content will be to extend democracy beyond the limits of bourgeois democracy.

* The transition to socialism will not require the 'smashing' of representative democracy and of parliaments; rather it will require their strengthening and development.

* Representative democracy is an essential precondition for the political organisation of socialist society.

* Future socialist societies will exhibit continuing political conflict; only within a framework of representative democracy and political competition will these conflicts be resolved in a creative manner.

* 'Socialism will be democratic, or it will not be'.⁶ **D**

⁵Marx and Engels 'The Communist Manifesto' *Collected Works* Vol 6 p506.

⁶Nicos Poulantzas *State, Power, Socialism* 1978 p265.

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